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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000340

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND SCA/PPD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV KPAO KG

SUBJECT: Kyrgyzstan: Prosecutor Warns Newspaper over Alleged
Insults to Bakiyev

Ref: A. Bishkek 197
1B. Bishkek 286

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On April 8, a Bishkek district prosecutor general officially warned journalists from the pro-opposition newspaper "Achyk Sayasat" not to "insult" President Bakiyev or risk prosecution for any future insults. The newspaper's response, printed in its April 10 edition, noted that the prosecutor's warnings and threats actually harm the President's reputation more than does the press criticism of the President. Efforts to silence independent media in the run-up to the July 23 Presidential election coincide with increased harassment of opposition politicians, their relatives, and business interests. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On April 8, a Bishkek district prosecutor's office issued an official warning to Acting Editor-in-Chief Yryseldy Mombekov and reporter Aibek Shamshykeyev from the Kyrgyz-language pro-opposition newspaper, "Achyk Sayasat," regarding certain articles that allegedly insulted the honor and dignity of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. The warning noted that continued insults toward the President would be prosecuted "in accordance with Kyrgyz laws."

¶3. (SBU) The warning referenced two April 7 "Achyk Sayasat" articles. The first piece, authored by Aibek Shamshykeyev and entitled "If it's not Tekebayev, Who Will be the President?," included the following editorial comments: "'Sir' Kurmanbek's policy that he pursued for last four years has made everyone depressed. Bakiyev's 'dung policy' has humiliated the Kyrgyz nation, which is so rich in hydropower." (Note: This refers to President Bakiyev's statement that Kyrgyz citizens should heat their homes with dung to conserve energy. End note.) "His words, 'I will not allow clans to rule' evaporated, and he himself has opened a wide lane for clan power. He filed criminal actions with questionable evidence against almost all Kyrgyz politicians who have unsheathed their swords, and he reinforced political persecution."

¶4. (SBU) The second story, written by stringer Berdikojo Tashtanbek uulu and entitled "When a Slave's Descendant Becomes President," opined that both former President Akayev and current President Bakiyev were bad presidents because they worried more about their families' interests than about national interests.

¶5. (SBU) On April 10, Acting Editor-in-Chief Mombekov published an editorial addressed to the Prosecutor General and the Ombudsman, which argued that the newspaper reflects popular viewpoints and other media reporting. The editorial concluded that the prosecutor's warning was unjustified and damaged the President's image and reputation more than did the newspaper articles.

¶6. (SBU) On April 14, reporter Aibek Shamshykeyev published an open letter to President Bakiyev. He asked Bakiyev whether he personally authorized the prosecutor's actions, saying it was illegal to do so.

He wrote to the President, "If you disagree with my criticism and you think that you did not make the mistakes I cited, and you can prove that, then I am ready to take responsibility for what I wrote.

But you are also responsible for what you do. We are all equal under the law." He ended his open letter to the President with a challenge: "I challenge you to carefully watch what is going on in society and to openly discuss it. You should face the truth, with help from the media. If you pressure the media, you should keep in mind that one day the free media will pressure you."

Comment

¶7. (SBU) This action against "Achyk Sayasat" is a troubling development, especially in the run-up to the July 23 Presidential election. Kyrgyz officials have taken measures in recent months to muzzle independent media, such as filing civil suits against journalists for libel and buying out independent media outlets.

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These steps, as well as the new tactic of threatening journalists with criminal prosecution, coincide with greater harassment of opposition politicians, their relatives, and business interests.

GFOELLER